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## The G-Rated Bible

*What happens when studying scriptures means unlearning their modern, sanitized versions?*

BY LINDSAY NIEDRINGHAUS '07

In the May Experience class, "Bible in Modern Culture," the whiteboard is blank except for one word written in large letters in the center: midrash.

"Midrash is a Hebrew term derived from the root *drsh*, which literally means to seek," explains Bryan Bibb, PhD. The term, Bibb adds, traces

back to rabbis in the first five centuries of the Common Era who chose to interpret Bible stories through the lens of their own time in order to better understand their contemporary relevance. Those midrashes have provided scholars with valuable insights into not only religion, but also into the time period and the projected

values or concerns of each midrash writer.

On a warm May morning in Furman Hall, Bibb's class is wrangling with several midrash interpretations—these derived from the story of the great flood (Genesis 6-9). The discussion among the eight students, however, moves quickly beyond the midrashes to the Biblical literature itself. That's because for many of them, this is the first time they have actually read the text. Several students are struck by how their previous knowledge of Genesis 6-9 is midrashic: "Noah's Ark" and its amalgamation of storybooks, movies, and childhood toys.

"Was there anything troubling about what you read?" asks Bibb wryly.

In the Genesis version,

rather than God smiling down on a happy boat full of animals, God is full of despair and anger:

*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them."* (Genesis 6:5-7)

"Quite ironic that one of the most violent passages in the Bible is the inspiration for curtains and bedding in nurseries," remarks Bibb.

Bibb then directs the class to a passage from Frederick Beuchner's *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. According to Beuchner, the explanation for those curtains and that bedding—not to mention the lighter versions of the Noah's Ark story—stem from the fact that human beings cannot psychologically come to terms with the actual implications of such a text. Instead, “we make it into a fairy tale, which no one has to take seriously.”

For the same reason that the story of Pearl Harbor was made into an action movie starring Ben Affleck, and the events of 9/11 have been interpreted into American-pride country songs, we have reduced the story of the Biblical flood into a more manageable layer that can be compartmentalized into our minds. In the process, we make it small enough to avoid fully engaging with its provocative issues.

Additionally, the flood's reinvention as a fable for children is another way in which we can dilute its psychic weight and, in some respects, dismiss having to wrestle with it. Beuchner says the story of the flood is so violent, so incredibly bleak, that adults pass it along to those who can only grasp a happy ending. In doing so, we give ourselves one.

“What's interesting are the ways these midrashes reveal something about us,” says Bibb.

The 1960s Mel-O-Toons movie about the flood, for example, depicts a “wicked world” with men throwing swords and spears. Nowhere in Genesis does the text convey that people in the world were at war. We can deduce from this midrash, then, that the culture of the 1960s was one in which war, for some, was considered evil—a reaction to the Vietnam War—and that it needed to be cleansed.

Or take the Hanna Barbera interpretation, produced in 1976, that focuses instead on a countercultural Noah as an outcast, being taunted and shunned by the townspeople for doing what is right, even if it is the unpopular choice.

Or the 2014 film *Noah*, in which Russell Crowe plays the ark builder as a zealous environmental warrior raging against the rapacious habits of men.

But as enlightening as midrashes can be about their times, there is something unsettling about them, too. Their reductions of the story to a consumable medium and the targeting of it to children may be evidence of a culture that cannot manage the harsh realities of its existence.

“*Gulliver's Travels* is too bitter about humankind, so we make it into an animated cartoon,” writes Buechner, “*Moby Dick* is too bitter about God, so we make it into an adventure story for boys. Noah's Ark is too something-or-other, so it becomes a toy with a roof that comes off so you can take the little animals out. This is one way of dealing with the harsher realities of our existence [rather than] facing them head on.”

Yet is this wise in the long run?

Bibb's May X class is a lesson in story interpretation, but the class discussion goes beyond that. Students begin to question the stories we as human beings choose to tell ourselves and whether those choices are toward truth or its obfuscation. If we are in fact only telling ourselves midrashes that will reduce complexity, enhance our comfort, or confirm our beliefs, then perhaps the braver, more authentic choice would be to return to, and confront, the “originals” once more. **E**



## THEN

### Reflection on the Importance of Furman as It Was

#### The first time I donned a

Furman track uniform, the ensuing question from my dormmate was, “Furman has a swim team?” It's true that the tiny one-pieces are commonly referred to as “bun huggers,” but that year, after our team went on to win a Southern Conference Championship in cross-country, no one confused us with swimmers anymore.

The team honor that year still means more to me than the two individual SoCon titles I won in the 800 meters. And I think that says a lot about Furman: The university has always been less about ‘you’ and more about ‘us.’

On a daily basis, I use principles I was taught during my undergrad and graduate years at Furman's health and exercise science department. Equally important are the lessons I was taught by former longtime track and field coach, and friend, Gene Mullin. “On time is late,” he used to say, and also that to believe in yourself allows you to believe you're capable of overcoming any hurdles set before you.

Engaged learning goes far beyond the classroom, extending into the sports arena and life outside the Furman bubble, and it was during these critical years that my passion for becoming a coach and mentor to student-athletes was born. In fact, my first job as an assistant coach at Furman helped launch my career.

After college, I won my first attempted marathon, went on to run the Boston Marathon twice, and recently won my first full-distance Ironman. The grueling 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride, and 26.2-mile run—even the preparation for it—is not for the faint of heart, but the relentless pursuit of a dream that was instilled in me at a young age and cultivated during my life at Furman is the driving force I try to pass on to the young athletes I work with daily.

Prior to attending Furman, I was unaware of what a “paladin” was. One common definition is “any knightly or heroic champion.” Back then and now, Furman athletics and the friendships formed hold a special place in my heart. Paladin pride for life!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more than a decade, Julie Stackhouse '01 has coached track and field at several Division I universities, including Furman, the United States Air Force Academy, the University of North Florida, and the University of Virginia. She now teaches at Providence School in Jacksonville, Florida, and is the owner of Stackhouse Fitness. She is sponsored by Jacksonville Running Co. and the Stellar Triathlon Racing Team.